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ON THE INITIATIC HIERARCHY

The allusion we made to the initiatory hierarchy, when speaking of the notion of "elite" as capable, beyond its general meaning, of being considered at several different levels, needs further clarification in certain respects, because frequent confusion arises on this subject, not only in the purely secular world, which is hardly surprising, but even among those who, in one capacity or another, should normally be more knowledgeable about what is being discussed. Moreover, it seems that any idea of hierarchy, even outside the initiatory domain, is particularly obscured in our time, and that it is one of those against which the negations of the modern spirit are most particularly vehemently attacked, which, in truth, is quite consistent with the anti-traditional character of the latter, a character of which "egalitarianism" in all its forms is, in short, simply one aspect. It is nonetheless strange to see this "egalitarianism" accepted and even proclaimed by members of initiatory organizations which, however diminished or deviated they may be in many respects, necessarily always retain a certain hierarchical structure, without which they could not subsist in any way; there is obviously something paradoxical, even contradictory, about this which can only be explained by the extreme disorder that currently reigns everywhere. Moreover, there is no need to dwell on it further here, for it is quite clear that we cannot consider addressing those who prejudicedly deny any hierarchy; what we meant was that, under these conditions, it is not surprising that this idea is sometimes more or less misunderstood even by those who still accept it, and that they sometimes misinterpret its various applications.

As we have just said, every initiatory organization is, in itself, essentially hierarchical, so much so that this could be seen as one of its fundamental characteristics, although, of course, it is not exclusively

unique to it, and it can also exist in a certain sense not only in traditional "external" organizations, but even in secular organizations, at least insofar as these are constituted, in their order,

according to normal rules. However, the initiatory hierarchy has something special that distinguishes it from all others: it is essentially formed by degrees of "knowledge," with all that this word implies when understood in its true sense, for this is what the very degrees of initiation consist of, and no other consideration can intervene. Some have represented these degrees as a series of concentric enclosures that must be crossed successively, which is a very accurate image, since it is indeed a "center" that one must approach more and more, until finally reaching it at the last degree; others have also compared the initiatory hierarchy to a pyramid, whose courses gradually narrow as one ascends from the base to the summit, so as to arrive here again at a single point that plays the same role as the center in the previous figure; whatever the symbolism adopted in this regard, it is precisely this hierarchy of degrees that we had in mind when discussing the distinctions occurring within the elite.

It must be clearly understood that these degrees can be indefinitely multiple, as can the states to which they correspond and which they imply in their realization, for it is truly a question of different states once knowledge is effective, as we have already had occasion to explain many times. Consequently, the degrees existing in any initiatory organization will never represent anything more than a classification, necessarily "schematic," as in all things, and ultimately limited to the consideration of certain principal or more clearly characterized stages; And, depending on the perspective adopted to establish such a classification, the degrees thus distinguished may naturally be more or less numerous, without this implying any contradiction or incompatibility whatsoever, for, fundamentally, this question does not touch upon any doctrinal principle and simply pertains to the methods that may be particular to each initiatory organization, even within the same traditional form, and all the more so when one moves from one of these forms to another. In truth, the only perfectly clear distinction

in all this can be that between the “lesser mysteries” and the “greater mysteries,” that is to say, between what relates respectively to the human condition and the higher states of being; everything else is, in the domain of each, merely subdivisions that may be pushed further or less far for contingent reasons.

On the other hand, it is also important to understand that the distribution of members of an initiatory organization into its different degrees is, in a way, only “symbolic” in relation to the actual hierarchy, because initiation, at any given degree, can, in many cases, be only virtual; if it were always effective, the two hierarchies would coincide entirely; but, if such a thing is conceivable in principle, it must be acknowledged that it is hardly feasible in practice, and even less so in certain organizations where these have undergone a more or less pronounced degeneration and where they too readily admit members, most of whom are quite incapable of obtaining more than a mere virtual initiation. However, while these are inevitable shortcomings to a certain extent, they in no way affect the very notion of the initiatory hierarchy, which remains perfectly independent of all such circumstances; a state of affairs, however unfortunate, cannot undermine a principle and cannot in any way affect it; and the distinction we have just indicated naturally resolves the objection that might arise in the minds of those who have had occasion to observe, in the initiatory organizations of which they may have some knowledge, the presence, even at the higher levels, of individuals who are all too clearly lacking in any effective initiation.

Another important point is this: an initiatory organization comprises not only a hierarchy of degrees, but also a hierarchy of functions, and these are two distinct things that must be carefully not confused, for the function with which someone may be invested, at whatever level, does not confer upon them a new degree and does not in any way modify the one they already possess. The function has, so to speak, only an “accidental” character in relation to the degree: the exercise of a given function may require the possession of a particular degree, but it is never necessarily attached to that degree, however high it may be; and, moreover, the function may only be temporary, it may end for many

reasons, whereas the degree always constitutes a permanent acquisition, obtained once and for all, and which can never be lost in any way, whether it be actual or even merely virtual initiation.

The truly essential initiatory hierarchy is therefore that of degrees; since it is properly a question of "knowledge" in all initiation, it is quite clear that being invested with a function adds nothing in this respect; it may give, for example, the ability to transmit the initiation to others, but not that of attaining a higher state oneself. There can be no degree or state that is superior to that of the adept; whether those who have attained it exercise certain functions in addition or none at all, makes absolutely no difference in this respect; and what is true in this regard for the supreme degree is also true, at all levels of the hierarchy, for each of the lower degrees[1]. Consequently, when one speaks of the initiatory hierarchy without further specification, it must be clearly understood that it is always the hierarchy of degrees that is being referred to; It is this one, and this one alone, which, as we said previously, defines the successive "elections" gradually progressing from simple initiatory "attachment" to identification with the "Center", that is to say, in other words, to the realization of the "Supreme Identity".

1 Let us recall that the adept is properly one who has attained the fullness of initiation. Some schools, however, make a distinction between what they call a "minor adept" and a "major adept"; these terms should then be understood, at least originally, as designating one who has reached initiation respectively in the order of the "lesser mysteries" and in that of the "greater mysteries".

THE DOUBLE SPIRAL

In his article “Hellenic Tradition and Greek Art” (December 1935 issue), Mr. Elie Lebasquais very rightly drew attention to the importance of the role played, in the symbolic “ornamentation” of archaic Greece, by the double spiral, which, he says, “can be regarded as the planar projection of the two hemispheres of the androgyne, offers the image of the alternating rhythm of evolution and involution, of birth and death, in short, represents manifestation in its dual aspect”; and we believe it is worthwhile to offer some further insights into this symbolism.

First of all, it should be noted that this representation can be considered in both a “macrocosmic” and a “microcosmic” sense; because of their analogy, one can always move from one to the other through a suitable adaptation; But it is primarily to the first that we will refer directly here, for it is in relation to the symbolism of the “World Egg” that the most remarkable parallels arise. From this perspective, the two spirals can be considered as indicating a cosmic force acting in opposite directions in the two hemispheres, which, in their most extensive application, are naturally the two halves of the “World Egg,” the points around which these two spirals wind being the two poles. It can be noted immediately that this is closely related to the two opposing directions of rotation of the swastika, these essentially representing the same revolution of the world around its axis, but viewed respectively from one and the other of the two poles; and these two directions of rotation indeed express the dual action of the cosmic force in question.

On the other hand, it is easy to see the similarity of this figure to the Far Eastern symbol of yang, in which the two semicircles that form the line internally delimiting the two light and dark parts of the figure

correspond to the two preceding spirals, and their centers to the two poles. This also brings us back to the idea of "androgyny," since the yang principle, represented by the light part, is considered masculine, and the y principle, represented by the dark part, feminine; these two principles are therefore in reality complementary, but their respective actions, in all areas of manifestation, appear to be contrary. We can therefore speak either of the dual action of a single force, as we did earlier, or of two forces produced by the polarization of this single force and centered on the two poles, and which in turn produce, through the actions and reactions resulting from their very differentiation, the development of the potentialities enveloped in the "World Egg"[1].

It is worth noting that these same two forces are also represented differently, though fundamentally equivalent, in other traditional symbols, notably by two helical lines winding in opposite directions around a vertical axis, as seen, for example, in certain forms of the Brahma-danda or Brahmanic staff, which is an image of the "World Axis," and where this double winding is precisely related to the two opposing orientations of the swastika; in the human being, these two lines are the two nadis, or subtle currents of right and left, or positive and negative (ida and pingala)[2]. Another identical representation is that of the two serpents of the caduceus, which is also linked to the general symbolism of the serpent in its two opposing aspects; and, in this respect, the double spiral can also be seen as representing a serpent coiled upon itself in two opposite directions; this serpent is then an "amphisbaena," whose two heads correspond to the two poles, and which, in itself, is equivalent to the two opposing serpents of the caduceus[3].

1 Those who like to seek points of comparison in the profane sciences could, for a microcosmic application, draw a parallel with the phenomenon of 'karyokinesis', the starting point of cell division.

2 The "Axis of the World," and the axis of the human being (represented physically by the spine), are also designated, due to their analogical correspondence, by the term Mēru-danda.

3 To explain the formation of the caduceus, it is said that Mercury saw two serpents fighting (chaos), and that he separated them (distinction of opposites) with his staff (determination of an axis along which chaos would be ordered), around which they coiled (balance of the two opposing forces, acting symmetrically with respect to the 'world axis'). It should also be noted that the caduceus is considered the characteristic attribute of two complementary functions of Mercury or Hermes: on the one hand, that of interpreter or messenger of the Gods, and, on the other hand, that of psychopomp guiding beings through their changes of state, or in the passages of a cycle of existence; these two functions correspond respectively to the two descending and ascending directions of the currents represented by the two serpents.

This does not take us away from the consideration of the "World Egg," for this, in various traditions, is frequently associated with the symbolism of the serpent; We might recall here the Egyptian Kneph, represented as a serpent producing the egg from its mouth (an image of the production of manifestation by the Word), and also, of course, the Druidic symbol of the "serpent's egg"[4]. On the other hand, the serpent is often described as inhabiting the waters, as seen in particular with the nāgas in the Hindu tradition, and it is also on these same waters that the "World Egg" floats; now, waters are the symbol of possibilities, and the development of these is represented by the spiral, hence the close association that sometimes exists between the spiral and the symbolism of waters[5]. If the "World Egg" is thus, in some cases, a "serpent's egg," it is also elsewhere a "swan's egg"; we are alluding here to the symbolism of Hamsa, which we have already discussed in a recent article[6]. Now, it often appears, and particularly in Etruscan representations, that the double spiral is surmounted by a bird; this is obviously the same as Hamsa, the swan that incubates the Brahmânda on the primordial waters, and which is also identified with the "spirit" or "divine breath" which, according to the beginning of the Hebrew Genesis, "was carried upon the face of the waters." What is no less remarkable is that, among the Greeks, from the egg of Leda, begotten by Zeus in the form of a swan, emerge the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, who correspond symbolically with the two hemispheres, and therefore with the two spirals we are considering, and who consequently represent their differentiation in this "swan's egg," that is to say, in short, the division of the "World Egg" into its two upper and lower halves[7]. We cannot, moreover, consider elaborating further here on the symbolism of the Dioscuri, which is quite complex, like that of all similar pairs formed of a mortal and an immortal, often represented as one white and the other black, the two hemispheres, one illuminated while the other

4 We know that this was actually represented by the sea urchin fossil.

5 This association is noted by Mr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy in his study Angel and Titan (see the review elsewhere). - In Chinese art, the spiral shape appears particularly in the representation of the 'double chaos' of the upper and lower waters (that is, formal and informal possibilities), often in relation to the symbolism of the Dragon.

6 See La Terre du Soleil, January 1936 issue

7 To clarify this meaning, the Dioscuri are depicted with hats of hemispherical shape.

is in darkness; we will only say that this symbolism, fundamentally, is quite closely related to that of the Devas and the Asuras, whose opposition is also related to the double meaning of the serpent, depending on whether it moves in an ascending or descending direction, around a vertical axis, or by unwinding or coiling on itself, as in the figure of the double spiral[8]. In ancient symbols, this double spiral is sometimes replaced by two sets of concentric circles drawn around two points that are also the poles: these are the celestial and infernal circles, to which the Devas and Asuras correspond precisely; in other words, they are the higher and lower states in relation to the human state, or the consequent and antecedent cycles in relation to the current cycle, which also corroborates the meaning of Yin-yang considered as a planar projection of the helix representing the multiple states of universal Existence. The two symbols are equivalent, and one can be considered a simple modification of the other; but the double spiral also indicates the continuity between the cycles; one could also say that it represents things from a "dynamic" aspect, while the concentric circles represent them from a "static" aspect[9].

When we speak here of the "dynamic" aspect, we are naturally still thinking of the action of the dual cosmic force, and more specifically in its relation to the inverse and complementary phases of all manifestation: "evolution" or development, unfolding, and "involution" enveloping, coiling, or again "katabasis" or downward march and "anabasis" or upward march, exit into the manifested and return into the unmanifested[10]. The double "spiration" (and we will note the kinship that exists in the very designation of the spiral and that of the "breath"

8 See the study by Mr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy already cited above — In the well-known symbolism of the "churn of the sea", the Devas and the Asuras pull in opposite directions the serpent coiled around the mountain which represents the 'world axis'.

9 If, instead of considering the whole of the universal manifestation, we were to limit ourselves to one world, that is to say to the state corresponding to the plane of the figure (assumed horizontal), the two halves of it would respectively represent the reflection of the higher states and the trace of the lower states in this world.

10 It is at least curious that Mr. Léon Daudet took the symbol of the double spiral for "diagram of the atmosphere." (Letters of Pagt-Bai: see the figure in Les Horreurs de la Guerre, and the considerations on the atmosphere in Melanehollay: he considers one of the two poles as the starting point and the other as the arrival point.) So that the spiral's path must be regarded as centrifugal on one side and centripetal on the other, which corresponds well to the two phases: evolutionary and involutionary; and what he calls atmosphere, in short, comprises the set of the two opposing currents of the cosmic force that we are considering here.

we spoke of earlier), is the universal “exhalation” and “inhalation,” by which are produced, according to Taoist language, the “condensations” and “dissipations,” resulting from the alternating action of the two principles Yin and Yang, or according to Hermetic terminology, the “coagulations” and “solutions”: for individual beings, these are births and deaths; for worlds, this is what Hindu tradition designates as the days and nights of Brahma; and, at all degrees, in the macrocosmic order and in the microcosmic order, corresponding phases are found in every cycle of existence, because they are the very expression of the law that governs the whole of universal manifestation.